

Reg Weeks

Reflection

10 January 2021

St Ronan's Eastbourne

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**Genesis 1: 1a**

**Mark 1:4-11**

*"In the beginning, God..." KJV*

I hadn't before recognised what a powerful and comprehensive statement of faith those four, brief, opening words of the King James bible represent.

And they are subtly different from the way the NRSV begins: *"In the beginning when God..."* That's just a statement about God's early activity, whereas the words of the KJV, stake a claim for the origin of all that is.



In the beginning, before anything was, there was God, and God created all that is. That was the distinctively Hebrew response to the question which must be posed to any thinking mind. Where did all this come from? Why is there anything at all? And of course, scientific endeavour continues to probe the universe, in all its manifold dimensions, still seeking more definitive answers.

So, the opening words of the Bible are a faith statement, a matter of belief regarding how it all began, how anything at all came to be. But then, so are the views of those who believe there is no God. It's a matter of choosing what you believe, based on all that you know, and the views of those whom you trust.

At one stage there was little doubt in the Western world that the Hebrews had got it right, but over two millennia, with the rise of increasing sophistication, not only of scientific method but also of biblical,

anthropological and archaeological research, the literal word of the scriptures regarding how things came to be, no longer squared with the discoveries of scientific enquiry. This led some to the belief that science had disproved the basis of faith, while others were led to cling tenaciously to views of God that didn't fit the known facts. Others again, began to dig more deeply into the truths that lay behind the ancient world-views reflected in scripture.

We need always to keep in mind that the single volume labelled 'Holy' that sits in all our pews is an extraordinarily complex collection of material in at least two major foreign languages, collected over 2000 years from oral tradition, handwritten scrolls, papyri and letters, first translated into English over 500 years ago (1526 to be exact) and revised editions and new translations are appearing to this very day. That's one of the reasons, the Presbyterian church requires those who train for its ministry to have a degree in theology. In the words of Paul's letter to the Corinthians they are to be "*Servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God*" But what sort of God are we talking about?

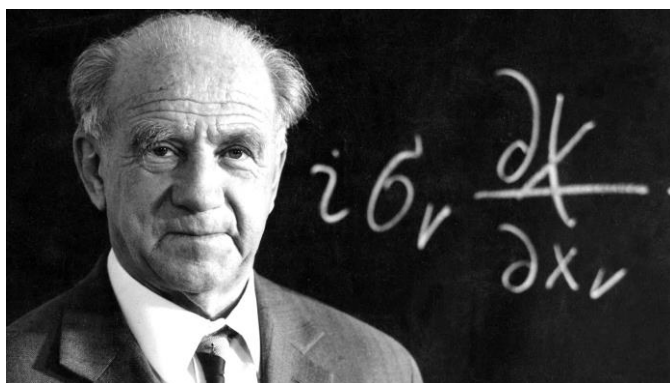
In the earliest times it was thought that storms, floods, earthquakes and other natural phenomena were the direct actions of God sitting above the bowl of the sky and, for example, opening the windows of heaven to allow the rain to fall through.

After the enlightenment, when science had begun to discover much more about the laws of physics and the nature of the universe, that gave way to the idea of a kind of first cause, or 'clockmaker' God, who set the whole thing running but took no further active part.

And some are happy to think of God as some kind of power, something akin to the picture painted by Star Wars - "*May the force be with you.*"

However, the advances of quantum physics are revealing deeper and deeper complexities with mind-boggling immensities on the one hand and sub-atomic particles of infinitesimal dimension on the other.

Weiner Heisenberg, a German physicist awarded the Nobel Prize in 1932 for his book "*The creation of quantum mechanics*" once said "*The first gulp from the glass of natural sciences will turn you into an atheist but at the bottom of the glass God is waiting for you.*"



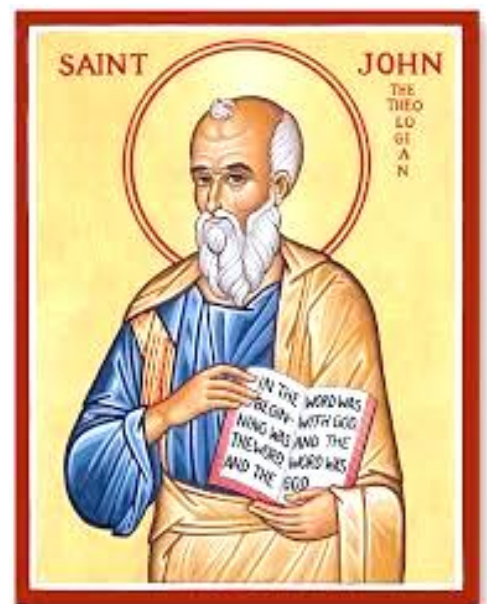
And, more recently, Mo Thomas, author of "Into the abyss" said "Just as in the written scriptures, the spirit of God leaves us clues in the universe - the scriptures of creation. They draw us toward truth at the end of any authentic scientific endeavour. They are the fingerprints of the creator, identifying and declaring the story of creation."

Speakers at a seminar on faith and science held in May 2018, at St John's in Wellington, and led by world-ranking scholars and physicists led us (the audience) to a similar conclusion.

But there's more to it than that. Christian thinkers from the earliest times have been working out what the life and teachings of the man Jesus might tell us about the nature of the one he called Abba.

John, one of the most theological and profound writers of the early church starts his gospel by claiming that the one he writes about is the very living word of God, the true light which enlightens everyone (John 1:9).

He it was that spoke so eloquently, not just about a God who creates but about a God who loves deeply. Passage after passage in the old testament speaks of the steadfast love of God – a love that never ceases, a love that is new every morning.



This is the understanding of God that inspired St Francis, and it was a deep engagement with Franciscan spirituality that informed the work of a little known but significant medieval theologian by the strange name of John Duns Scotus.



He is quoted regularly by such current Franciscan writers as Richard Rohr. The name by the way just comes from the fact that he was born in the little village of Duns, in Scotland, about a day's walk south east of Edinburgh.

Diane and I have just finished an e-book on the importance of his thinking, called 'Scotus for Dunces' by Sr Mary Beth Ingham, Professor of Philosophical theology. It



was originally used as a text in a graduate course, affectionately known by that name. We found it both a stimulating and a challenging read.

*She writes "Like Francis before him, Scotus is struck by the beauty of the created order and understands its existence as gift from a loving God. The beauty of creation manifests itself both visually and through the song or canticle of the universe. This beauty sets the stage for an encounter: an encounter with this gracious God, so personally attentive and intimately present to all that is, yet so hidden and discreet. It is this God who gently calls each person to respond to goodness in love, who invites and supports each one to imitate that love in self-gift, and who ultimately graces each with eternal life in the fullness of relational communion."*

Speaking as a Franciscan, I find her presentation provides me with a sound theological and philosophical framework and structure to all that I value in the Franciscan approach to the faith. *"Scotus examines with relentless logic the deeper metaphysical structure of reality based upon love. This reality is entirely consistent with Scripture, especially the scriptural depiction of God as the God of Exodus, the Incarnation, and the Resurrection."*

But more than that, Mary Beth suggests that Scotus' thought has considerable value for the post-modern world. *"First, his commitment to the dignity of the individual human person as image of God touches our concern for this world and its future.*

*Second, his optimism about the created order connects with ecological concerns and with a desire for a renewed anthropology.*

*Third, the centrality of love over knowledge as key to true rationality presents a different model for us to understand ourselves and our place in the world.*

*Fourth, the importance of freedom as a perfection of God and of human reason connects his thought to contemporary concerns for autonomy and moral living.*

*Scotus's philosophical insights have a modern resonance: they frame the human journey in terms of the dignity of the individual, the importance of rationality and the primacy of freedom. At the same time, the particular way in which they are organised challenges us to reconsider our understanding of these key elements in the light of the perfection of human nature in love."*

In my view this takes us right back to the words Jesus heard at his baptism “*You are my dear son; in you I take great delight.*” (Mark 1:11). That slightly different translation is from the on-line New English translation published in 2005 and revised in 2017. And, again, there is a subtle difference in meaning.

Has it ever occurred to you that the Holy one might take delight in you, as you begin to respond to what you perceive of that love?

Doesn't it call forth a joyful desire to please, rather than a dutiful obedience?

The nature of the relationship changes; the trust builds; the treasured words of scripture come alive with new resonance and meaning.

Day by day the relationship grows, and the communion deepens.

Do not doubt – you are the beloved children...!

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